

Can We Go Back to the Beginning?

by W.M. Easton

We must act on the complete revelation of God's Word and not ignore what exists, even if it means resisting the effort to break down Scriptural discipline.

Scripture: Matthew 18:20, Acts 2:42, Ephesians 1:22, Colossians 1:25, Hebrews 13:8

Topics: "Scriptural Authority", "Church Discipline"

Description

W.M. Easton emphasizes the importance of holding fast to the unchanging truth of Scripture, particularly regarding the Person of Christ, and the need to resist the temptation to deviate from the foundational teachings of the apostles. He highlights the progression of divine revelation throughout history, from the early days of the Church to the full understanding of the Church as the Body of Christ and the House of God. Easton stresses the necessity of acting upon the complete revelation of God's Word, even in the midst of the Church's ruin, and the importance of maintaining Scriptural discipline and separation from unfaithfulness to Christ.

Transcript

The remark is often made by those who desire a wider path, "We must go back to the beginning; to the original ground that brethren took they received all godly souls that came; we have become too narrow and exclusive, etc." Now the question really is, can we go back to the beginning? If we think or speak of the Person of Christ, we can, and indeed **MUST** go back to "that which is from the beginning," and refuse all "development," as we are taught in John's epistles. The blessed Person of the Lord Jesus stands "the same yesterday, today, and forever" (Heb.13:8), and knows no change or development. We cannot be too clear, or insist too strongly on that.

Then there can be no question we are bound to go back to Scripture and "hold fast" all the truth as taught therein: it never alters. But the point is, can we go back to the beginning of the Church's history and act only on that today? Or can we even go back to the early days of "brethren" and act as they did, in the midst of the present changed circumstances, and with the fuller light of the written Word which God has so blessedly unfolded to us in His grace through those beloved brethren, and which they had to learn gradually themselves? Impossible! We cannot put the hands of the clock back; nor can we ignore the past, or undo that which has been done. But let us look at this a little.

When the Church was formed by the descent of the Holy Ghost on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2), we read of three thousand souls who gladly received the Word through Peter's preaching, and were "added" to the

already formed Assembly. Up to that time there were only the two classes in the world, Jews and Gentiles, out of which the Church was to be formed, and the door had not yet been opened for the Gentiles to come in; neither was there any corrupt Christianity as in later days, from which souls might come, calling for care and discrimination in their reception. At the start they evidently received all who came; and it is certain that none came who were not prepared, professedly at least, to renounce Judaism and be henceforth known as DISCIPLES of the rejected and crucified Jesus.

Of these it is said, "They continued steadfastly in the apostles' DOCTRINE, and FELLOWSHIP, and in BREAKING OF BREAD, and in PRAYERS" (Acts 2:42). Now what did that doctrine or teaching embrace at that time? It could set forth the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of the Lord Jesus, and also the descent of the Holy Ghost but it certainly could not take in the Church as the Body of Christ, or the House of God, with all the distinctive teaching set forth in the Pauline epistles, for of these there had been no revelation as yet. Could we then, in this day, limit ourselves to the apostles' doctrine as known in those days, and ignore the further, fuller, and final light and teaching revealed to the apostle of the Gentiles by the Holy Ghost to "complete the Word of God?" (Col.1:25.) Surely not!

Acts 2, was the dawning of the light of Christianity. An advance certainly upon what they knew or experienced during the Lord's life on earth: but not yet the clear shining of the full light and teaching about the Church as the Body of Christ, or the House, or dwelling-place of God by His Spirit (Eph.1:22,23; and 2:22).

It was blessedly true, of course, that those at Pentecost FORMED THE CHURCH; it existed then; but they knew it not. That it was not Judaism, they were well aware; but what it was they could not then have said. All they could know was, there was a new thing in existence, formed by the presence of the Holy Ghost, and into which all who severed themselves from Judaism by baptism were received. And we read "they continued steadfastly in the apostles' DOCTRINE." They had received it and it formed them as a distinct company. Their FELLOWSHIP was based on it. The BREAKING OF BREAD was the OUTWARD expression of that fellowship, while PRAYER was the expression of their dependence on God to sustain them in it; three very important things surely.

With the conversion and commission of Paul, however, the sun rises higher in the heavens and the light of Divine truth waxes brighter. That which existed in Acts ii. becomes definitely known as the Church, the Body of Christ, united to Him by the Holy Ghost: as also the House of God, the dwelling-place of God by His Spirit; while His "within" and "without" are dearly defined, and saints exhorted to keep the Spirit's unity in the bond of peace. Discipline, too, is insisted on in accordance with the holiness which becomes God's house forever, and the presence of the Lord in the midst. In fact the full revelation of the mind of God as to the mystery which had been hidden in Himself was now made known and the Word of God completed (Eph.3:9; Col.1:25). In the light of this, then, we cannot act on a partial revelation of truth, but must take in the complete revelation, and the just proportions and relations of one truth to another. It is one perfect and complete whole, and must be treated as such.

Today we are living in the midst of the ruin of the Church. We cannot restore it. We cannot even aim at being an expression of it. We are only witnesses to its ruin. God's Word, however, is not ruined. The principles of the Church therein revealed are the same today, and imperatively binding on all saints as much as when they were first revealed. Do the Lord's people grasp this great fact? and are we to believe it and act upon it? Or must we believe that those principles were only meant for the bright and palmy apostolic days before the ruin had set in?

The excuses and the executors of today practically say this latter is so, and that those principles cannot be carried out any longer, and therefore we must give up our exclusive practice, and receive all true Christians irrespective of where they come from, provided they are personally godly; and thus by so doing get back to the beginning again. That the where they come from has been unduly pressed, and the state of the person ought to be considered more than their associations, etc. Alas, what a manifestation of the blinding influence and delusions of the last days, and what utter indifference all this displays to the claims of Christ and the teachings of Scripture in order to escape difficulties and obtain an easier path.

We are being constantly reminded that brethren did this at the start when God recovered the truth to them, and they received all the godly who came irrespective of the places from which they came, and without requiring their disassociation from them, and that we have got away from their simplicity, and become too exclusive, and we ought to get back to the principles and practice which obtained amongst them at the first. This certainly sounds very plausible; but the question again arises, can we do this any more than we can go back to the state of things in Acts ii.? Certainly not! We cannot put the hands of the clock back, as I have before remarked. A state of things has come in since then and exists, and cannot be ignored in that easy fashion.

We must remember that when God began again to gather saints together unto the Name of the Lord Jesus by once more unfolding truths that had been buried for centuries, the truth did not burst forth in all its fulness and clearness at once. It shone gradually, as it had been revealed gradually at the first. Brethren learned it little by little, and in some cases by painful experience.

It would appear that at the start, when godly souls got exercised in the different denominations here and there, they simply saw that it was their privilege to meet together as Christians to remember the Lord in the breaking of bread; and this was done without any thought, on the part of many at least, of separation from those systems as denying the truth of the one body and one Spirit. Moreover, the bulk of those systems, if not all of them, were, at that time at least, what might be termed orthodox. The ritualism, rationalism, and open infidelity which honeycombs them today was certainly not so advanced then, if it really existed at all. God, however, did not leave His saints with the mere glimmerings of light. He increased it and led them on step by step (mainly through the instrumentality of one man, the late J.N.Darby) until Paul's doctrine became fully known, and the principles of the Church of God were apprehended and acted on, though, like all truth, it had to be bought, and, alas, bought dearly, too!

The proper relation of saint to saint, and assemblies to assemblies, amid the general ruin of the Church as a whole, became more clearly apprehended and acted on; while the Lord's presence in the midst of His gathered saints as the "Holy and the True," with the Personality, presence, and power of the Holy Ghost in the assembly as guiding and controlling, whether in worship, service, or discipline, became an acknowledged fact and power in their lives, and separated them from all that would not bear the searchlight of God's holy Word.

The truth of the "one body and one Spirit" (Eph.4), became to them something more than a mere expression -- it was a fact -- a truth to be acted on. They knew that the body of Christ was composed of all true Christians, but it was through man's failure invisible. That the Church as a visible testimony on earth was a wreck. They had learned that. But they knew likewise that the truth was not a wreck, it still remains, and holds good for faith to act on at all times till the Lord comes to take the saints to be with Himself, and therefore they acted on the truth. They made no attempt to restore the Church. They did not even profess to be a testimony to the truth of it. They simply acknowledged the ruin, but acted on the divinely given

principles of Scripture, in the power of a divinely given faith, and found the Lord's presence and blessing in the path of obedience and separation to Himself according to His Word (Matt.18:20).

Today, the reception of saints from the systems around, owing to the prevalence of so much evil doctrine in them, calls for far greater care than would have been necessary in earlier days, and for greater exercise of soul and dependence on God for guidance; so that the question of "association" becomes a very prominent and important one, yea, more important than ever. (See 2 Tim.2:19-22.)

The danger, however, to which we are most exposed today, and which the enemy is most active in using, is not the reception of saints from the Systems; few, if any, are likely to come, or want to come; but it is the effort of some within to break down the barriers which a Scriptural discipline has erected, and which bars numbers of saints from our fellowship through this very question of association. They would compel us to receive from places, without any acknowledgment, on the part of these, of wrong done to the Lord and His people (even though in ignorance), so that communion might be restored in a righteous and godly way. In fact, an effort, and that of a very determined character, has been made to force on us intercommunion with companies from which we were compelled to separate; and that spite of our conscience, our protests, and our repudiation of such principles and practices; and under the plea of getting back to the beginning. This is Satan's present effort, and must be resisted. It is unrighteous and therefore unscriptural.

We cannot ignore this serious question of association, and treat those desirous of coming from assemblies from which we were compelled to separate because of unfaithfulness to Christ, in the same way as we might treat other Christians who occupy an altogether different position. "Of some making a difference" (Jude 22) is a seasonable word in this connection.

We live in the midst of the light of the full revelation of God; and, alas, in the midst of the ruin of the Church and must act accordingly. We cannot ignore what exists, nor can we go back. If the path has been left, there must be confession and return; and if there is wilful association with such companies it must be owned and given up. No success in service will compensate for lack of obedience in this. God is sovereign and can act and bless where and when He pleases. Our path is the path of obedience; and "to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams" may well sound in our ears and hearts today in the midst of the increasing apostasy. The Lord keep all our hearts and minds and make us true to Himself till the end.

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